

To Imagine

The split in the life world between object and subject happened some two million years ago somewhere in East Africa. About forty thousand years ago, no doubt in a cave in southwestern Europe, the subject withdrew further into its subjectivity to get an overview of the objective circumstances in which it found itself. But at such a remove, things were no longer tangible, manifest, for no hand could reach them anymore. They could only be seen. They were merely appearances—objective circumstances turned into apparent, “phenomenal,” and therefore deceptive circumstances: in pursuit of an apparition, hands can miss the object. The subject is once again in doubt about the objectivity of its circumstances, and out of this doubt come observations and images.

Images are intended to serve as models for actions. For although they show only the surfaces of things, they still show relationships among things that no one would otherwise suspect. Images don't show matter; they show what matters. And that allowed the hand to probe further into the circumstances than before. Image makers faced two obstacles, however. First, every observation is subjective, showing one instant from one standpoint, and second, every observation is ephemeral, for the standpoint is in constant motion. If images were to become models for actions, they had to be made accessible, intersubjective, and they had to be stabilized, stored. They had to be “published.”

The earliest image makers known to us (e.g., at Lascaux) fixed their observations on the walls of caves to make them accessible to others (to us as well); that is, they acted (for hands are required for

this fixing), and did so in a new way, inasmuch as they used their hands not to grasp objects (e.g., bulls) but to manipulate surfaces to represent objects (e.g., bulls). They sought symbols, and the activity was about symbols, about a gesture in which the hands moved back from the object to address the depths of the subject in whom, so stimulated, a new level of consciousness was emerging: the “imaginative.” And from this imaginative consciousness came the universe of traditional images, of symbolic content, the universe that would henceforth serve as a model for manipulating the environment (e.g., hunting bulls).

Symbols that are linked to content in this way are called codes and can be deciphered by initiates. To be intersubjective (to be decoded by others), each image must rest on a code known to a community (initiates), which is the reason images are called “traditional” in this essay. Each image must be part of a chain of images, for if it were not in a tradition, it would not be decipherable. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily always work. That is what it means to “publish”: to put a subjective observation into the symbols of a social code. Of course, it doesn’t necessarily work. Because every observation is subjective, each new image brings some sort of new symbol into the code. Each new image will therefore distinguish itself to some small degree from the previous one and so be an original. It will change the social code and inform society. That is just what the power of imagination is: it enables a society informed by images to generate continually new knowledge and experience and to keep reevaluating and responding to it.

Yet it is a dangerous anachronism to regard these constant changes in the image code as a developmental process and to speak of a “history of images” (e.g., from the bull paintings at Lascaux to those of Mesopotamia and Egypt) or to suppose that such a history unfolds slowly in comparison to our own. For what makers of images set out to do was exactly not to be original and to inform society but rather to be as true as possible to previous images and to carry their tradition forward with as little noise as possible.

These makers tried to reduce their subjectivity to a minimum, an attitude that can be observed in so-called prehistoric cultures in the present. The African mask and the Indian textile are concerned with an unchanging, eternal code, a myth. To the extent the mask or the textile is original, it has failed.

The universe of traditional images is a magical and mythical universe, and if it nevertheless changed constantly, this was through unintentional coincidence, by accident. This is a prehistoric universe. Only since linear texts appeared, and with them conceptual, historical consciousness—some four thousand years ago—can one rightly speak of a history of images. For only then did imagination begin to serve (and oppose) conceptual thinking, and only then did image makers concern themselves with being original, with deliberately introducing new symbols, with generating information. Only then was an accident no longer an oversight but rather an insight. Images of our time are infected with texts; they visualize texts. Our image makers' imaginations are infected with conceptual thinking, with trying to hold processes still.

The universe of traditional images, not yet sullied with texts, is a world of magical content. It is a world of the eternal return of the same, in which everything lends meaning to everything else and anything can be meant by anything else. It is a world full of meanings, full of "gods." And human beings experienced this world as one permeated by trouble. That is the imaginative state of mind: everything carries meaning, everything must be appeased. It is a state of guilt and sin.

At first glance, technical images seem similar to the prehistoric images just discussed. But they are on an entirely different level of consciousness, and among them life proceeds in an entirely different atmosphere. Visualization is something completely different from depiction, something radically new, and will now be taken under consideration.